

Learning from True Stories of Victims/Survivors

By Judge Kate Huffman

Preview:

Victims of sexual offences are diverse in age, gender, and relationship to the abuser.

Article:

In the twenty-one years I served as a trial court judge, I presided over many tragic cases involving allegations of sexual abuse and assault against children. Unfortunately, sexual victimization remains all too common in the United States. According to a recent survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention¹ 54% of women and 31% of men in the U.S. will be the victim of contact sexual violence within their lifetime,² and many others will experience other non-contact types of sexual victimization. An estimated 10% of children suffer sexual abuse prior to the age of 18.³ Sexual victimization takes many forms and can include indecent exposure (in person or online), exploitation via child sexual abuse materials (commonly referred to as child pornography), physical sexual contact and violent sexual assault. The real extent of sexual offences, though, remains unknown, as an estimated 66% of sexual offenses go unreported to law enforcement authorities.⁴

Victims of sexual offences are diverse in age, gender, and relationship to the abuser, and the circumstances under which the abuse occurs are also varied. There is a common misconception that most victims of sexual abuse and assault are strangers to their abuser. In reality, the vast majority of sexual abuse victims know their offender. Family members and acquaintances, such as teachers, coaches and family friends, make up 93% of the child sexual abuse perpetrators,⁵ while 73% of adult victims in reported cases also know their offender.⁶

Consider these scenarios which represent just some of the conduct I heard detailed in the courtroom (note that names have been changed to protect victims). All of these situations occurred with abusers well known to the victim, and help us to know key actions advocates can take:⁷

¹ Kathleen C. Basile, Sharon G. Smith, Marcie-Jo Kresnow, Srijana Khatiwada and Ruth W. Leemis, *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 Report on Sexual Violence*, Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (June, 2022).

² Contact sexual violence, in the study, included rape, sexual coercion, and/or unwanted sexual contact.

³ Catherine Townsend and Alyssa A. Rheingold, *Estimating a Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence Rate for Practitioners: A Review of Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence Studies*, Darkness to Light, August, 2013.

⁴ RAINN, *The Criminal Justice System: Statistics*, Accessible online at <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>

⁵ Howard N. Snyder, Nat'l. Center for Juv. Justice, *Sexual assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics* 10 (2000), available at

⁶ *Id.* See also Bruce J. Winick, *Sex Offender Law in the 1990's: A Therapeutic Jurisprudence Analysis*, 4 Psychol. Pub. Pol'y & L. 505 (1998)

⁷ The names and some of the circumstances have been changed so as to prevent the identification of and revictimization of the children involved.



- Kyra, aged 7, left in the care of her grandmother's boyfriend, Malik, was sexually assaulted by Malik in a secluded storage room in his apartment building. Malik told Kyra that he would kill her mother if she told anyone what he had occurred and he blamed Kyra for being a "bad girl." Several days later Kyra told her mother about Malik's conduct. In this situation, irrefutable physical DNA evidence was present, as well as video from inside the apartment complex showing Malik leading Kyra into the storage room. Even so, Kyra's grandmother refused to believe that Malik assaulted her and supported Malik throughout his prosecution and eventual imprisonment.
- Paul, an adult male in his 30's, became acquainted with another adult, Valeria. One day Valeria left her 11-year-old daughter, Mia, in Paul's care while she ran errands. While in his care, Paul sexually abused Mia. Immediately after Valeria and Mia left Paul's home the following morning, Mia told her mother about Paul's conduct. Valeria hesitated to contact the police because she was concerned that her daughter would be further traumatized by police involvement, and she feared Mia's father would capitalize on the event to obtain custody of Mia. After several days, and after talking with a family friend, Valeria finally contacted the police.
- Gloria and Alex struggled to meet their work and hectic family responsibilities, and were appreciative when their neighbor friend, James, offered to assist them by spending time with their two sons, ages 12 and 13. James picked up the boys from school each day, bought them video games, took them to amusement parks, and watched movies with them. The boys were eager to spend time with James because of the attention and gifts they received from him. Over time, James slowly introduced the boys to pornography, which included showing them child sexual abuse materials of children with the same ages. Following this grooming and manipulation, James repeatedly sexually abused the boys over the course of several months. Gloria and Alex discovered James' conduct after observing pornographic videos on the family's home computer and, when confronted, the boys admitted James had given them the videos and then disclosed the sexual abuse.
- Bill had been Audrey's soccer coach since she was 11 years old. Over the course of several seasons, Bill singled out Audrey after each game and highlighted her play, thereby developing a "special" relationship with her. He touched her frequently in conversation, which was progressively more familiar as time went on. When she was 14, Bill began texting Audrey, first with casual communication over team announcements and then gradually transitioning to frequent discussion that isolated Audrey from her family. Eventually, Bill began video-chatting Audrey late at night. On a number of occasions, Audrey spent the night at Bill's house with his daughter, who was Audrey's age. During these overnight stays, Bill asked Audrey to meet in a basement room where he sexually abused her while everyone else slept. Audrey's parents became



concerned when Audrey's grades dropped quickly and school officials complained that Audrey frequently fell asleep in class. Audrey's mother checked on her at 2:00 am one morning and found her asleep with her phone in her hand. She then discovered on the phone a history of late-night inappropriate texts with Bill that included requests for *additional* sexual images of Audrey. Audrey's mom quickly reported to child protective services. A therapist noted during the trial that Audrey was not fully forthcoming about the exact nature and extent of their physical relationship, likely due to how much Bill had manipulated and groomed her to feel that they were in a loving, consensual relationship.

The details of these cases reflect the realities of childhood sexual abuse—abuse happens under varied circumstances. Victimization occurs among both males and females, and within a broad spectrum of ages and relationships to the abuser. However, all of the victims share one common characteristic—vulnerability. That vulnerability may take the form of the superior physical strength of the perpetrator, knowledge of the victim's assailable circumstances, or very commonly, a relationship power imbalance creating greater potential for the abuse. Child abusers often exploit any vulnerability by manipulating and grooming their victims.

Opportunity represents a second common characteristic in sexual offending. Another common misconception about sex offenders is that they act impulsively. Instead, many sexual offenders often engage in rational decision-making, engaging in painstaking and lengthy planning or grooming. Abusers develop strategies to make their victims comfortable with their presence, the relationship and physical touching, and contrive post-offense behaviors designed either to discourage victims from reporting their crimes or to discredit the victim.⁸ If we have a suspicion a child is being, or has been abused, or if a child has disclosed abuse to us—we must make a report to the appropriate authorities—even if the abuser is someone we know and trust. We must always act to protect the child, no matter what.

My experiences in court also taught me many things about the responses of child victims of sexual offenses. First and perhaps foremost, I have learned not to expect a specific reaction or response from a child victim. Some victims disclose the abuse immediately, while others wait years to divulge the trauma (if they ever do). Child victims may unveil pieces about the abuse they experienced, testing the reactions of adults to the information. Others may provide detailed accounts immediately upon reaching a place of safety away from the abuser, and still others never reveal the sexual abuse. Regardless of how or when a child discloses, we must believe them, as false reports of child sexual abuse directly from the child are rare.

One certainty remains, childhood sexual abuse represents a traumatic experience requiring effective treatment to avoid or mitigate long-term consequences. One way to assist with that is to recognize when there may be an indicator of abuse, apart from

⁸ Eric Beaugard and Benoit Leclerc, *An Application of the Rational Choice Approach to the Offending Process of Sex Offenders: A Closer Look at the Decision-Making*, 19 *Sexual Abuse: J. Res. & Treatment* 115 (2007)



when they actually tell us. A child who has experienced sexual abuse may exhibit one of these common behavioral indicators:⁹

- Increase in nightmares and/or other sleeping difficulties
- Fear of disclosure (retribution in some form by the perpetrator or loss of trust/not being believed by those in a caring role)
- Withdrawn behavior
- Angry outbursts
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Not wanting to be left alone with a particular individual
- Sexual knowledge, language, and/or behaviors that are inappropriate for the child's age
- Guilt, shame and self-blame

If a minor is exhibiting one/some of these behaviors, it does not automatically mean abuse is occurring. However, something could be wrong, and it should be carefully addressed. After observation, a conversation with the youth is a good place to start.

Conclusion:

As safe adults and partners in our work of protecting God's children, understand that *any* child—regardless of their age, gender, family circumstances or a perceived invulnerability—can be a victim of sexual abuse. Our shared mission remains the safeguarding of all children, requiring us to be ever-vigilant in watching for the signs and circumstances, as well as reactions, that may signal a child in jeopardy.

⁹ National Child Traumatic Stress Network, available at <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/sexual-abuse/effects>.